



128 Dorrance Street, Suite 400
Providence, RI 02903
Phone: (401) 831-7171
Fax: (401) 831-7175
www.riaclu.org
info@riaclu.org

May 5, 2026

Ashley Deckert
Director
Department of Children, Youth & Families
101 Friendship Street
Providence, RI 02903

VIA MAIL AND EMAIL

Dear Director Deckert:

We have received a complaint from Matthew Gunnip, the president of SEIU Local 580, about a recent email he received from you in response to testimony he provided before the House Judiciary Committee on April 16, 2026 in his capacity as union president. Specifically, you advised him that his testimony raised “serious confidentiality concerns” in violation of R.I.G.L. § 42-72-8 and that “any further dissemination of such information may constitute a confidentiality violation.” However, we believe that his testimony contained no breach of confidentiality, but instead constituted speech protected by the First Amendment. I am therefore writing to ask you to reconsider your warning to him based on that testimony, which was clearly addressing a matter of important public concern: his opinion about a lack of adequate DCYF staff to handle abuse and neglect complaints.

In order to understand our and his position, I have pasted below the entirety of the comments that Mr. Gunnip made that include the statements leading to your warning. Those few particular sentences at issue are highlighted.

[House bill] 8092 speaks to DCYF and childcare and child protective services. We’ve had hearings, finance hearings and other hearings regarding DCYF. We represent workers in child protective services. That’s a division in crisis – silent crisis. DCYF might not agree with that, but our front-line workers agree with that. So I have real concerns without knowing the extent of the bill regarding what involvement DCYF will have in that – and that’s because we have workers concerned that we have calls coming into the hot line right now that aren’t investigated and should be investigated. We had the example of a worker who left...who left working on the call floor – on the hotline – they left that because one thing just pushed them over the edge. It was a call that came in. A 10-year-old was at his desk with his head on the desk crying. “What’s wrong?” “My dad’s beating me. He hit me over the face with a belt and belt buckle.” And they didn’t even investigate that. We had a concern – which I know the Child Advocate is aware of – where there’s a report of a father masturbating in his bed with the child there and that wasn’t investigated. Now that’s just wrong. We bring these concerns up to the Department and the Department says, “oh give us some specific cases.” I can only

give you so many specific cases because our workers are afraid of retaliation. It's a really difficult environment to work in. And lastly, I'll just say as far as resources for DCYF, this legislature has given a tremendous amount of staffing resources to DCYF. This legislature – specifically the House of Representatives – put in the budget last minute, last June, a report that mandated that DCYF report where the 90 positions that got funded in 2021 what did you do with that money? That report was due in the fall. What did they tell you? They said we gave...out of that millions of dollars we added 20 social case workers. The truth – there's about the same amount of social case workers now as in 2021. I'm sorry, they added 40 social case workers. There's about the same amount of social case workers now as when that funding became available in 2021. We added about 20 child protective investigators. The truth...there's about the same amount of child protective investigators now as when the funding was made available in 2021.

As these comments make clear, Mr. Gunnip made only a cursory and fleeting reference to two alleged calls of abuse that the agency received and that he contended were not acted on properly. These few sentences are neither gratuitous nor revealing of the identity of the parties. Nobody hearing that testimony would have any idea who those people are. Instead, those brief references attempt to provide context to Mr. Gunnip's claim about the alleged lack of adequate agency staffing. We believe that the imposition of discipline for purported breaches of confidentiality based solely on those passing comments providing context to his testimony would raise serious First Amendment concerns.

Having said that, I want to emphasize that we certainly appreciate and support the Department's strong interest in protecting the confidentiality of records of individual children and their families who seek the agency's services or are the subject of investigation. State law appropriately seeks to safeguard the privacy of that information. But we believe it would be constitutionally problematic to interpret that obligation so broadly as to apply to the type of asides that Mr. Gunnip made at the hearing.

To the extent that the Department has any policies that would treat those comments as a violation of confidentiality, we would urge that they be revised in order to ensure that First Amendment standards are not violated while the Department is engaged in the admittedly critical role of protecting the privacy of client records.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter, and I look forward to hearing back from you about it.

Sincerely,



Steven Brown
Executive Director

cc: Misty Delgado
Matthew Gunnip